

Percy Sledge

By Tom Silverman

It was 1966. The year was best known for the release of the historic *Pet Sounds* album, but it also saw the first Number One hit for Simon and Garfunkel, with “Sounds of Silence”; the Monkees, with “Last Train to Clarksville”; and Tommy James and the Shondells, with “Hanky Panky.” In fact, more than one-third of that year’s Number One hits were by artists who had never before charted. One of these, “When a Man Loves a Woman,” would go on to become the most remembered rhythm & blues record of that year. Percy Sledge’s powerful voice, coupled with his Sunday-go-to-meeting innocence, rang true to millions of listeners worldwide. His ability to tell his tale of heartbreak simply yet elegantly influenced virtually every rock & roll artist who was touched by soul music. You hear the gospel, you hear the country, you hear the blues, you smell the South, and you feel the pain. When Percy Sledge sings, you are there.

The “Golden Voice of Soul,” Percy Sledge was born on November 25, 1940, in Leighton, Alabama. His father died when he was two months old. In his teens, Sledge sang at the Galilee Baptist Church and in the cotton fields. Early on, he was steeped in the country sounds of Jimmy Reed, Roy Acuff, and Hank Williams. He began performing with a five-man a cappella group, the Belltones, who won first place singing “The Banana Boat Song” at a contest sponsored by the Alabama A&M New Farmers of America.

In the early sixties, Sledge worked as an orderly at Colbert County Hospital, in Sheffield, Alabama, be-

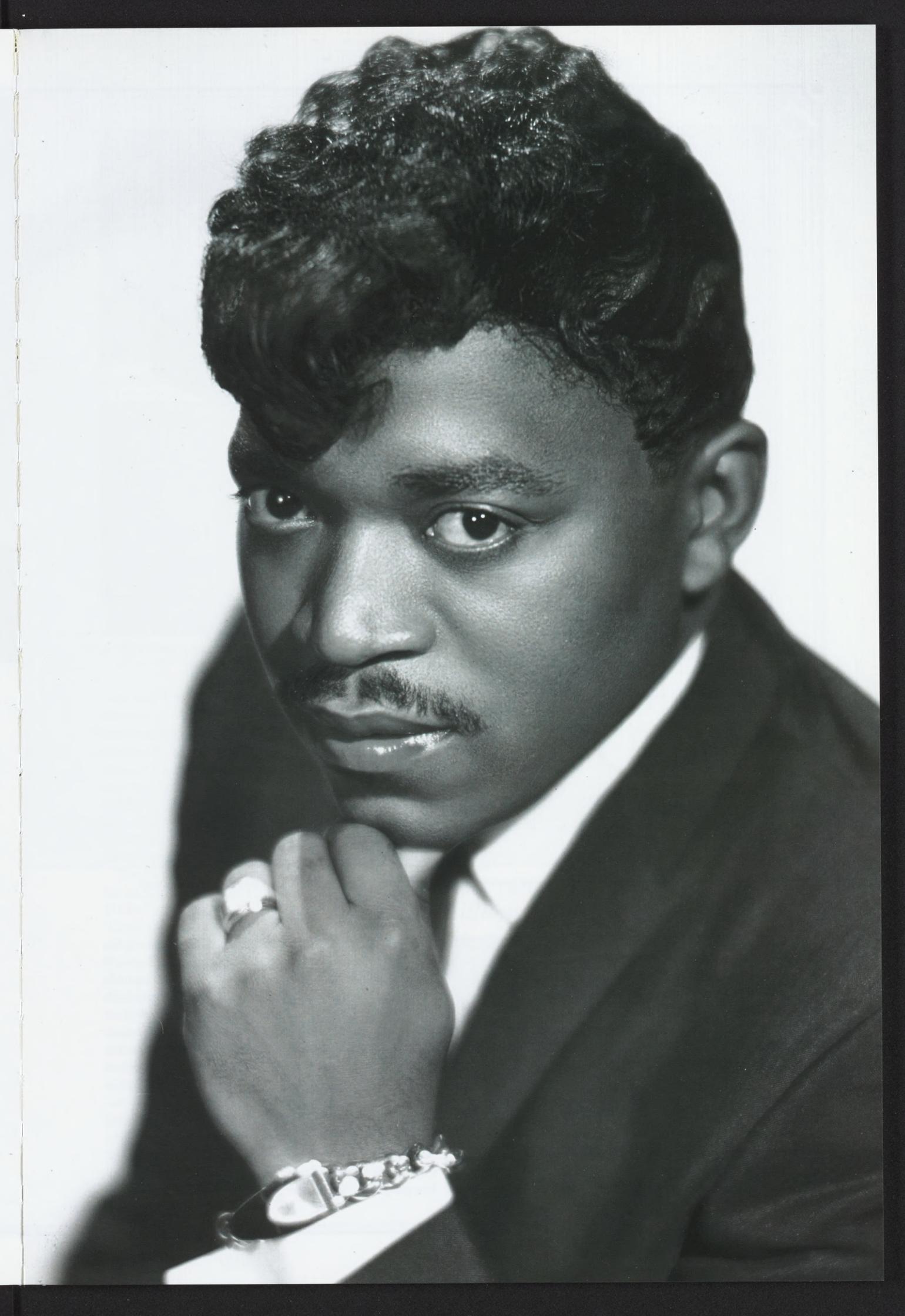
fore taking a construction job in 1965. That year, a few weeks before Christmas, his girlfriend left him to move to Newark, New Jersey. “I didn’t have any money to go after her, so there was nothing I could do to try to get her back,” he later said. Then, on December 21, he was laid off from his job. With things about as bad as they could get, as he packed up his tools, Sledge vowed to his coworkers that he would get a record deal and have himself a big hit within the next six months – and buy them all drinks. Later that day, a local group called the Esquires Combo asked him to sing with them on Christmas Eve, because their regular vocalist had laryngitis. The depressed Sledge at first said no, but when



he heard they would pay him fifty dollars, he agreed. That night at the gig, he asked bass player Cameron Lewis and organist Andrew Wright to play something in any key. Out came the phrase “Why did you leave me, baby?” which would turn into “When a Man Loves a Woman.” “I really didn’t think about it, it just came out,” said Sledge. “It was ‘a happy accident’ – wasn’t no heavy thought; I was just so damned sad. I’d been singing that crying melody in the fields picking cotton.”

Quin Ivy, a local DJ who owned a record store and a recording studio, happened to be in the audience that Christmas Eve. He encouraged Sledge, Lewis, and Wright to work more on “Why Did You Leave Me, Baby.” Soon after, Sledge auditioned the revamped song, now called “When a Man Loves a Woman,” at Ivy’s Tune Town record store, completely winning him over. In early 1966, at Sheffield’s Norala

► Alabama native Percy Sledge in an early publicity shot, around the time that “When a Man Love a Woman” went to Number One

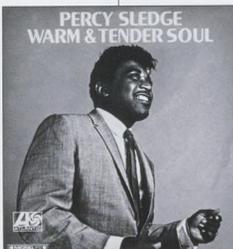




▲ The emotional and impassioned country-soul music of Percy Sledge has continuously influenced rock & roll artists since his 1966 debut.

Studio (later Quinvy Studios), Ivy coproduced the song with his recording engineer and arranger, Marlin Greene, who played guitar on the track, and with Spooner Oldham providing the memorable organ line. Most of the musicians on the session, which was engineered by Jimmy Johnson, were regulars at the Muscle Shoals Fame Studio: Albert "Junior" Lowe on bass, Roger Hawkins on drums, and a horn section composed of Jack Peck on trumpet and Billy Cofield and Don "Rim" Pollard on tenor sax. Backing vocals were supplied by Jerry Eddleman, Jeannie Greene, Sandy Posey, and Hershel Wiggington.

Ivy signed Sledge and played the final version of the song for Fame owner Rick Hall, who was so impressed he called



▲ Sledge's second album for Atlantic in 1966

Jerry Wexler at Atlantic, who knew a hit when he heard one. "I got so excited when I got that record," recalled Wexler, who quickly bought the master and Sledge's contract from Ivy. "When a Man Loves a Woman" rocketed to Number One on May 28 (and stayed there for two weeks) and also held the Number One spot on the R&B chart for a month. As he'd promised his construction-worker buddies five months earlier, Sledge the singing sensation took them out for drinks after one of his headlining performances.

Rapidly establishing his soulful version of "dirty South" tinged with country flavor, Percy Sledge began a roll with two more hits: "Warm and Tender Love" (#17 pop, #5 R&B,



▲ A candid shot of Percy Sledge taken backstage in the 1970s



▲ Percy Sledge performing at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival



▲ The "Golden Voice of Soul" knocking audiences dead, circa 1967

1966) and "It Tears Me Up" (#20 pop, #7 R&B, 1966). Having helped establish the Muscle Shoals sound, Sledge worked with songwriters Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham on many of his hits. Rick Hall's Fame Studios was becoming a hit machine, in fact, producing records for Sledge as well as such artists as Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Clarence Carter, and Arthur Conley. And Fame session guitarist Duane Allman would add his distinctive slide sound to numerous Sledge recordings.

The Sledge hit parade continued for the next few years with "Love Me Tender" (#40 pop, #35 R&B, 1967), "Cover Me" (#42 pop, #39 R&B, 1967), and "Take Time to Know Her" (#11 pop, #6 R&B, 1968). Sledge placed fourteen singles on the pop charts from 1966 to 1974 and hit the R&B charts thirteen times during the same period. He continued to record for Atlantic until 1974, when he made an album for Phil Walden at Capricorn Records, where Sledge's last charting record, "I'll Be Your Everything," hit the R&B Top Twenty in 1974.

Twenty-one years after the release of "When a Man Loves a Woman," Oliver Stone featured the number in his 1987 film *Platoon*, sparking new interest in the song: Used by Levi Strauss in a British television commercial, it went to Number Two on the U.K. charts and was rereleased throughout Europe. The renewed enthusiasm garnered

Sledge performances on *Saturday Night Live* and *Entertainment Tonight*, as well as some MTV video play.

In 1989, Sledge was one of the first recipients of the Rhythm & Blues Foundation's Career Achievement Award, given to artists who have made lifelong contributions to the development of rhythm & blues. In 1993, the

Alabama Music Hall of Fame presented him with a Lifework Award for Performing Achievement. Sledge has continued to record over the years, including the album *Blue Night* in 1994. His most recent effort, 2004's *Shining Through the Rain*, includes performances by Phil Upchurch, Jakob Dylan, Paul Jones, Don Heffington, Greg Leisz, and Carla Olson. Its country-soul sound has received high critical acclaim.

The music of Percy Sledge has continuously influenced rock & roll artists since 1966. Listen to Procol Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale" or talk to numerous rock & roll artists who were around in the sixties and they will acknowledge the importance and influence of Percy Sledge to their development. Covered by Michael Bolton and Bette Midler and even sound-checked by the Grateful Dead, Percy Sledge is rumored to have once briefly employed a young Jimi Hendrix as his backup guitarist. One thing is clear: There was magic in Sheffield, Alabama, in late 1965 and early 1966, and Percy Sledge was in the middle of that magic. ●

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